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Support for HB4965

Honorable House Criminal Justice Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of myself and families with incarcerated loved ones across Michigan. This entire package of bills before you are issues that I and many families I have worked with have experienced firsthand. I commend you for working to address the criminalization and treatment of youth in Michigan, to bring us in alignment with most other states. Specifically, I would like to thank Representative Chang for sponsoring the Family Advisory Board Bill, HB4965, which is the focus of my testimony.

I have attached the current Family Advisory Board proposal which I drafted and submitted to former Director Heyns. This began the formal pilot Family Advisory Board working with the MDOC Administration, meeting quarterly to address issues together.

A few years prior to this, I had requested meetings with MDOC Administration to address general concerns affecting many families who have an incarcerated loved one. These meetings occurred sporadically, but were certainly beneficial when they occurred. Out of this experience, it became more apparent to myself and other families, that we needed a formalized board with set meetings to continue this work to address issues that create barriers to families supporting their loved ones who are inside, and to address barriers that deteriorate family connectedness during incarceration. Families have viable solutions!

We have held two formal meetings with the pilot Family Advisory Board, which is meeting quarterly. This began in May. Our work has included suggested revisions to MDOC's Family Information Packet, assisting administration to communicate the most pertinent information to families, addressing the need for a medical release to be available for prisoners to sign, long-term loss of visits over substance abuse tickets. Our work now will focus on ways to improve visitation statewide. We are seeking input from families across Michigan.

Working with families to increase support and address issues that we experience as family members is vitally important due to the fact that families and friends of prisoners are called upon to provide the supports necessary for returning citizens coming back into our communities. It is proven that creating support and engaging families during incarceration reduces problems inside and lowers recidivism for those returning. This in turn creates safer communities.

Creating a law that formalizes a Family Advisory Board is critical. Currently the continuation of this board is at the mercy of the Director of Michigan Department of Corrections. Thankfully, Director Washington has agreed to continue the Board. Representative Chang has worked to include a diverse group of individuals to create collaboration between various parties who have interest in improving the system, but with the focus remaining on those families or individuals who were directly impacted by being in the Michigan Department of Corrections. California has a similar statewide Board, which was used as a model for this bill. The families I work with and I request your support of this bill.

2015 ESTABLISHMENT OF FAMILY ADVISORY BOARD

This proposal was submitted to the Michigan Department of Corrections for the creation of a Family Advisory Board. Director Heyns accepted this proposal in January, 2015. A pilot Family Advisory Board was established under the Family Participation Program. The second Family Advisory Board meeting will be May 1st, 2015. There are currently nine members serving on the board. Board members are made up of formerly incarcerated individuals and family members of those currently incarcerated. The proposal, as accepted, follows:

The Michigan Department of Corrections recognizes the important role that families play in the support and success of an incarcerated loved one both during and following incarceration. Last year we learned through MDOC that only 12% of Michigan prisoners are receiving visits. The Department has endorsed the Family Participation Program, which has pilot sites in four prisons currently. The Family Participation Program has found that more communication between the Department and families is needed, and is grateful the administration recognizes the need to create greater family support.

The Family Participation Program (FPP) is requesting the establishment of a Family Advisory Board. This Board would advise the Michigan Department of Corrections Administration on the impacts of policies on families with incarcerated loved ones. This would help build trust, respect and cooperation between families and the Department of Corrections. The Family Advisory Board will complement the Department's efforts to increase family involvement and improve its rehabilitation programs.

The Family Advisory Board will provide input, feedback, and an additional perspective on a variety of issues that concern the families of prisoners.

The Board will consist of eight volunteers who have had a loved one incarcerated one of whom will be teenagers with an incarcerated parent, and one member who has successfully returned to society and completed parole. The MDOC will designate a staff member from the Central Office to serve as a liaison between the Department and the Board. The Board will meet quarterly. The members of the Board will be selected by the Family Participation Program. Family members and returned citizens who would like to be a part of the part of the Family Advisory Board will have the opportunity to sign up on the (FPP) website or by calling the Family Participation Program phone line. The Board will begin meeting in January, 2015.

The responsibilities of the Family Advisory Board will include:

- Bringing family's barriers, suggestions and positive feedback to the Department of Correction's leadership;
- Assisting the Department of Corrections in providing an environment that promotes trust, respect, and fairness in its interactions with prisoners' families;
- Promoting visits and other forms of communication between families and prisoners;
- Working with the Department to make visits more positive and meaningful;
- Establishing a link between the Department and families that is broad-based and not simply complaint-driven; and
- Ensuring that families feel respected and welcomed at the facilities.

Between the quarterly meetings, the Advisory Board will meet with community support groups and solicit input from families throughout the state. This information will assist in setting the Board's agenda and priorities for each quarter. These community meetings will be held monthly and will be open to families and the general public and will be publicized in advance in the area where they will be held. Suggestions and recommendations of the Board will be provided directly to the Department through written documents and/or meetings with Department officials.

The Family Advisory Board will provide a meaningful voice for families and loved ones who have someone incarcerated or under the supervision of the Department.